



SEND IN THE CLOWNS!

Liturgical and caring clowns bring humor and healing to congregations

BY R. ALEX CHAMBERLAIN

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ome people can't abide clowns. They find them frightening, creepy, or so plain weird that they can't make a connection to the character who stands before them. My wife is one of these people. She remembers the clowns at the circus falling down, appearing to get hurt, and looking for an opportunity to make fun of an audience member. Being around them made her nervous.

I was of the opposite frame of mind and would lean into what the clown was offering. I was a college student at home on spring break when my home church offered a day-long clowning workshop that ended with a visit to a nursing home. I had grown up in a family that prized humor and play, and as a child I got a kick out of what a circus or parade clown offered. I signed up, learned some of the basics regarding makeup and character development, and we hit the nursing home as very amateurish but enthusiastic ambassadors for love. Always an extrovert, I learned that most people want to play, are ready to take themselves less seriously, and find that a clown can provide a counterweight to whatever they find is challenging in their lives. On the brink of my sixtieth birthday I retain the conviction

that it is a privilege in life to be able to provide someone with a respite from a sad time in their lives.

While not everyone will agree that the idea, much less the reality, of clowning is a worthwhile means for conveying the Christian faith, that does not mean that we should ignore the opportunities that *do* attend this approach. First, it is important to note what *kind* of clowning is appropriate for a faith-based community. Most of us are familiar with the circus clown that my wife remembers so vividly from childhood. However, it is my conviction that the circus clown's approach is not often appropriate in the church. While a circus clown seeks to entertain, a clown in the faith setting seeks to convey a theological concept, or to embody caring. A circus clown primarily looks for a laugh or

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applause, while a faith-based clown seeks to make a connection. As a chaplain, a minister, and a clown, I use humor to seek out what I have in common with another person or group so that we can create a link and form a relationship.

There are two different types of clowns that are most often associated with faith-based communities: liturgical clowns and caring clowns. Liturgical clowns use the practice of drama to convey theological concepts or scriptural stories while caring clowns most often operate in a hospital or hospice setting. As a theological practice, liturgical clowning is choreographed. It is not spontaneous or improvisational. Liturgical clowns often are trained in dance, theater, or gymnastics (although this training is not required) and employ their bodies in movement in front of a gathered community. For these clowns, from their makeup to the actions to their clowning personas, everything emerges from a deep sense of faith, and they use their clowning as a ministry that conveys the joy, awe, wonder and mystery of Christ to others in the church community.

Although I have experience as a liturgical clown, my own training and experience is more aligned with caring clowning. Caring clowns, or hospital clowns, often are constant features in children's hospitals but can also provide humor and healing for adults. People in hospitals and nursing homes, and those who are enduring other challenges and turning points in life, need a sense of play. The depression and discouragement that linger around such facilities can be lightened, or even dispelled, when people learn to carry themselves a bit lighter. A clown brings an element of surprise, joy, and empathy.

As a clown, I add a tear to my cheek when I put on my makeup. This represents that

clowns walk a tightrope between the silly and the tragic. I recall visiting a stroke patient who had lost the ability to speak, so I decided that I needed to be mute as well. I sat down, looked at the TV and saw a news program on. I shrugged my shoulders and added a looping circle by my head to indicate that the world is crazy. The patient responded with a lop-sided smile. I then looked intently at her. After a brief period of silence I frowned and pointed to the tear on my face. Her face crumpled and tears flowed from her own eyes as I held her hand. I sighed, she sighed. It was perhaps a ten-minute visit that conveyed empathy, a supportive presence, and a break from the loneliness and isolation that sprung from her injury. She waved and offered another crooked smile as I left the room.

It is a privilege when others allow you to enter their world, and humor is the door through which we can walk and meet people in their vulnerability, worry, or isolation.

Ironically, one of the key traits clowns can bring them is our own sense of inadequacy and humility. People may not feel happy as a result of our spending time with them, but through the Spirit of Christ they may feel less helpless or anxious, and certainly will feel less alone. Funny enough (ha!), a key attitude for a clown is that we should go in ready to play, not to "make" people laugh. Our job is not to cheer them up, but to make a connection. It is all about having fun rather than "being funny." Liturgical and caring clowns don't have a repertoire of jokes; instead, they *are* the joke, finding room in God's creation to laugh at ourselves and to bring others along in the fun.

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ARE YOU READY FOR A CLOWN AT CHURCH?

If you're ready to send in the clowns, remember these important tips:

- **GET SUPPORT**
Be sure that your church leadership knows what you are doing and supports you!
- **CHOOSE YOUR CLOWN**
Make sure you have people involved who are more than willing to face critique and who are ready to make mistakes and incorporate them into what they are offering. Remember that for a congregation new to the idea, the best clown is probably a trusted, well-known member of the congregation.
- **CONSIDER THE CONTEXT**
Introducing clowning in the context of children is much more likely to be well received than introducing clowning out of the blue at a service of Holy Communion!
- **REMEMBER YOUR AUDIENCE**
When kicking off a Vacation Bible School, have a clown or two in the narthex or entryway being playful with children. Or, in the fall on the opening day of Sunday school have a clown handing out flowers to the parents who bring in their children.